

## *Persistent Localism: English Social Change and the Shaping of New England Institutions*

### I

The purpose of this investigation is to reconsider the relationship between ideas and institutions in seventeenth-century New England. Intellectual historians such as Perry Miller simply took it for granted that Puritanism was responsible for the shape of social institutions in Massachusetts Bay and left it up to other historians to work out the exact interplay between the two. The task, however, has proved more difficult than it may once have appeared. Recent research has expanded our knowledge of the colony's institutions—its towns, churches, and families. At the same time, intellectual historians have analyzed in ever greater detail the subtleties of Puritan thought. But while this growing body of scholarship is in many ways impressive, it has failed to explain how Puritan ideas affected Massachusetts social institutions.

Without denying the centrality of Puritanism in the history of New England, this study suggests that the religious beliefs that the colonists carried with them to the New World cannot in themselves account for either the original form or the subsequent development of specific institutions in Massachusetts Bay. Since there seems no reason to doubt the important role of ideas in the founding of that society, our goal will be to determine whether another set of ideas might not explain more adequately the peculiarities of the colony's social development.

*From Puritans and Adventurers: Change and Persistence in Early America by T. H. Breen. Copyright © 1980 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission. Footnotes omitted. First published in William and Mary Quarterly.*

It is the thesis of this essay that vague generalizations about the world the colonists left behind have obscured our understanding of the formation of New England institutions precisely because such generalizations neglect the colonists' institutional experiences in the mother country immediately prior to emigration. The towns and churches of Massachusetts were shaped by Charles I's ill-advised attempt to increase his authority by attacking local English institutions. The people who accompanied Governor John Winthrop came from diverse regions within England, some from populous commercial centers such as London and Norwich, others from isolated rural communities, but regardless of where they originated, most had been affected in some personal way by the king's aggressive effort to extend his civil and ecclesiastical authority. Between 1625 and 1640 his government made what appeared to many Englishmen—not just Puritans—to be a series of arbitrary attempts to dominate county and local affairs, to assert the king's influence in matters that his predecessors had wisely left alone. Throughout the kingdom his subjects suddenly found themselves forced to defend what they had come to regard as traditional institutional forms.

The experience of having to resist Stuart centralization, a resistance that pitted small congregations against meddling bishops, incorporated boroughs and guilds against grasping courtiers, local trainbands against demanding deputy lieutenants, and almost everyone in the realm against the collectors of unconstitutional revenues, shaped the New Englanders' ideas about civil, ecclesiastical, and military polity. The settlers departed England determined to maintain their local attachments against outside interference, and to a large extent the Congregational churches and self-contained towns of Massachusetts Bay stood as visible evidence of the founders' decision to preserve in America what had been threatened in the mother country. And if the argument of this chapter is correct, it may offer a clue to disputes that divided the colonists as soon as they were safely out of Charles's reach. In fact, as we shall see, the settlers' English experience helps explain the bitter controversies between Winthrop and the local freemen who regularly elected him to office.

### II

Historians of Massachusetts Bay have usually included in their analyses of the colony's social institutions something called the "English background." But one finds little recognition in their writings, especially in survey accounts of early American settlement, that the migrants' ideas about social institutions might have been influenced by the timing of their departure or by the particular locality from which they had originated.

Seventeenth-century English society was neither stagnant nor uniform. The men and women who moved to New England during the 1630s had different institutional experiences in the mother country—different attitudes, different memories—from those of people who had already migrated to

Virginia or who would eventually transfer to Pennsylvania. Throughout the century unstable political leadership, internal wars, and economic crises either altered or threatened to alter England's social institutions—its government, its churches, its army—and if one is to understand why a particular group of colonists behaved in a certain manner, one must recapture its specific English background. The critical period may have been no more than a few years preceding emigration in which rapid social and political change produced new ideas, raised fresh expectations, or generated bitter memories.

When the colonial historian contemplates seventeenth-century English society, his attention is naturally drawn to the confrontations between king and Parliament, to the affairs of court, to civil war and rebellion, and it is easy to suppose that all Englishmen must have followed these dramatic occurrences with eager interest. From this perspective the colonists' English background becomes a narrative of how people reacted to the major events of their times. But the focus here is skewed. For many men and women who moved to America the constitutional and religious battles at the national level only indirectly influenced their thinking about social institutions.

By and large the English people lived in small agricultural communities. This fact does not necessarily transform our analysis into a fragmented discussion of the peculiarities of each community. It is still possible to generalize about the ways in which inhabitants of boroughs and villages across the English countryside responded to what they perceived as outside threats, the most serious usually coming from the king himself. For this purpose it is not sufficient to catalog the arbitrary decisions that Charles I made during the late 1620s. Nor is it enough to chronicle plagues and depressions. Instead, an attempt must be made to discover what kinds of common institutional experiences people living in isolated communities throughout England were having at this time, to comprehend how they reacted to what appeared to be an unprecedented level of external interference in local affairs. It is in these scattered but shared confrontations that one will find the specific English background relevant to the founding of Massachusetts Bay.

New England's social institutions appear in large part to have been shaped by Charles's efforts to expand his civil and ecclesiastical authority by curtailing the autonomy of local English institutions, efforts that forced people to think about protecting what they regarded as traditional rights from a meddling king. Charles became monarch in 1625, and Englishmen throughout the realm soon felt the impact of his policies upon their daily lives. What kind of society did the new king disturb? What were the institutions of the mother country like before he attempted to centralize his power? The answer, of course, would have been different depending on where one lived and what one's experiences had been. People felt local attachments to various levels of English society, to country villages, incorporated boroughs, religious groups, and county communities. To understand how these local bonds affected the settlement of Massachusetts Bay it is necessary to consider each level separately.

We know a good deal about the character of the English countryside, the hamlets, and scattered manor houses. A thoughtful description has been offered by the English historian Alan Everitt, who contends that the three distinguishing attributes of much of seventeenth-century English country society were its diversity, its insularity, and its continuity. Everitt argues that the people living in what he calls "local communities" throughout England had little interest in events that occurred outside their own immediate environment. National politics had no place in these agricultural villages, and the lives of most persons were bound up in the simple "affairs of buying, selling, making love, marrying, bringing up a family, and with all those thousand little concerns that tied together the bonds of family life." Each region developed its own special skills and crafts, its own unique farming practices.

Given the primitive state of communications in the early seventeenth century, one might attribute such strong local attachments solely to physical isolation. While isolation was certainly a major influence, there is evidence that the reign of James I was accompanied by a heightened sense of "local loyalty" or particularism. The Tudors had clipped the wings of over-mighty nobles but had neglected to establish a reliable centralized royal bureaucracy in the villages and country shires. In the absence of a strong national bureaucracy local leaders filled the vacuum, stressing as they did so the importance of local autonomy. And in those communities which possessed no "gentlemanly household," the yeomen or husbandmen were apt to run everything themselves. Almost everyone in the English countryside before 1625 had a stake in maintaining the customary routine of agricultural life.

Some seventeenth-century Englishmen lived in incorporated boroughs, small to middling size cities like Boston, Ipswich, Norwich, and Great Yarmouth, whose ancient royal charters gave them special rights of self-government. At the time Charles became king an incorporated borough might elect a mayor and burgesses, enforce local ordinances, hold fairs, and determine the qualifications for freemanship. Although these boroughs, usually regional trade centers, were less insular than the country villages, they were no less diverse in character. Some were narrow oligarchies; others allowed fairly broad participation in civil affairs. Many corporations also exercised ecclesiastical patronage and, as in the instance of Great Yarmouth, jealously guarded "the right of choosing their own minister." Because the boroughs, especially those engaged in foreign commerce, were often havens for nonconformists, the selection of ministers frequently fell to men of Puritan leanings—a fact that neither escaped nor pleased Charles and Archbishop William Laud. What is important to note here, however, is not the widespread nonconformity but the corporations' sense of their own continuity and independence. As the mayor and burgesses of Boston explained, their city was an "ancient borough" and "from time immemorial . . . a body corporate." Like their rural neighbors, the freemen of the boroughs had an obvious interest in preserving their autonomy from outside interference.

Charles also inherited a peculiar religious situation. Some of the ablest

historians of this century have examined the origins of New England Congregationalism, and there is no need to review their work. One recent essay, however, merits special attention. Patrick Collinson has investigated what he calls the "popular protestantism" of pre-Civil War England, and some of his findings, tentative though they are, should cause historians to reconsider the adequacy of any interpretation that regards congregational polity as the invention of a few Cambridge-educated divines. Collinson argues that after the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, Protestant dissent split into a "framed sectarianism," characterized by scores of little religious groups that "agreed as to the *defenda* but not as to the agenda of the further reformation." Many of these bodies appear to have been voluntary organizations in which the members, not the ministers, decided matters of discipline and theology. Collinson recognizes that the Reformation contained other tendencies besides congregationalism. Nevertheless, as he observes, "it is hard to see how the movements generated within popular protestantism, left to themselves, can have had any other end."

The important words here are "left to themselves." In the fifteen or so years before Laud decided to bring the nonconformists into line, dissenters had become better entrenched and more diverse, especially in the incorporated boroughs. During this period James I had done little to make good his threat of 1604 to harry the Puritans out of the land, and the sects may have grown accustomed to a certain measure of independence, of self-determination, and, perhaps it is fair to say, of congregationalism. Although the men and women involved probably composed only a small fraction of the English population, they would be disproportionately represented in the settlement of Massachusetts Bay. Charles's religious troubles resulted not only from his blundering efforts to punish dissenters, but also from his decision to institute such a policy after "popular protestantism" had had so many years to establish itself. The members of these little Protestant sects must have been as concerned as other Englishmen in the period before 1625 about the need to preserve local autonomy.

Another level of English society is also relevant to the specific background of Massachusetts Bay—the county communities. If town and country dwellers of the early 1620s felt a sense of political loyalty to anything beyond a few local institutions, it was likely to have been more to a county community than to the English nation as a whole. Within the shires a network of interrelated gentry families usually stood between the king and his subjects. Because the Tudors failed to replace the unpaid local gentry with salaried crown officials, "local particularism grew step by step with the growth of the central government." The gentry dominated county affairs, drilled the trainbands, sat on the quarter courts, served in Parliament, and by the time Charles became king it is difficult to imagine how any monarch could have successfully challenged their authority. They acted as mediators, rationalizing royal policies to farmers and borough freemen while simultaneously lobbying for county interests at court. If the monarch alienated these powerful gentry fam-

ilies, he lost effective contact with thousands of ordinary Englishmen living in places like Norfolk and Kent. Indeed, in the early decades of the seventeenth century the English body politic was composed of sets of loosely connected county elites, each of which placed its own rights and prerogatives before those of the crown. In some cases, provincial leaders self-consciously developed an idealized county history, a mythical heritage that provided all believers with a sense of regional identity.

It is difficult to establish how many men and women felt a part of these county communities; if a village had no resident gentry family or were extremely isolated, the county identification may have been small. Perhaps it was only the gentry themselves who perceived politics in this manner. The point is that the existence of county communities heightened the particularism that seems to have been present at other levels of English society. The natural instinct of the local ruling gentry was to preserve an independent heritage, a set of old customs and privileges, against all outside threats. It is important to remember that while few of the men who colonized Massachusetts Bay had been county leaders of the first rank, several dozen at least had been associated with the ruling gentry and carried to the New World political impressions formed within England's county communities.

Charles disrupted these local institutions. He came to power in 1625 determined to strengthen the court, curtail religious dissent, and build an efficient army—in short, to centralize his authority at the expense of the local and county communities. As Lawrence Stone has observed, the king's plans were in keeping with the growth of royal absolutism throughout Europe. In fact, if his actions are viewed from the perspective of the Continent, it appears that "the objectives and methods of Charles, Laud, and Stafford were precisely those in which the future lay." Although historians can now explain why Charles's dreams of absolutism were doomed from the start—why in the face of deeply rooted traditions of common law and representative government he could never have become an English Louis XIV—his subjects feared he might succeed.

Charles went about his business with a humorless rigor disturbing to persons grown accustomed to James's easygoing ways. Even though the new king declared that he was defending his rightful prerogatives against parliamentary encroachment, his approach and methods looked, at least to some people, like radical innovations, and on all the levels of English society that we have examined his efforts to increase royal control upset customary patterns of life. His policies threatened the autonomy of the county communities, the dissenting congregations, the incorporated boroughs, and the thousands of local communities that had formerly ignored national politics. Previous monarchs had sometimes been forced to remind excessively independent Englishmen of their responsibility to the throne. But Charles attacked across the board, and his ill-conceived reforms created more enemies than one king could handle.

Insufficient funds continually plagued Charles's government; all his plans

seemed to require more money than Parliament was willing to grant. His disastrous military expeditions on the coast of France, his ever-growing number of court favorites, and his personal extravagance put tremendous strains on the exchequer. He asked his subjects for free gifts and, when that failed, for forced loans. By the 1630s the king was demanding ship money from areas traditionally exempt from such levies. Much has been written about the collection of these unconstitutional revenues, and there is no need to recount the bitter struggle between Charles and Parliament over this issue. What is important is that the king's unprecedented efforts to obtain money alienated Englishmen of all types. He unwittingly helped to break down the diversity and isolation of English society by creating a grievance that affected everyone.

The king's innovations were by no means restricted to unparliamentary taxation. He had the misfortune to rule during a period of general economic instability. Unemployment was high, especially in the textile regions. In the late 1620s serious food shortages developed, and groups of "lewd and dissolute persons" were reported wandering about the countryside. Charles and his advisers became convinced that unless something were done to relieve the suffering, rioting would spread throughout the depressed areas. Such fears were not without foundation. In 1629, for example, an Essex court hanged a woman and three male companions for breaking into a house in broad daylight and stealing some corn, "the woman saying 'come, my brave lads of Maldon, I will be your leader, for we will not starve.' In an effort to preserve order, the Privy Council took control of local poor relief. It forbade the export of certain grains and directed justices of the peace to levy rates that might be used to provide employment for indigent workers. While these orders were well intended, the Council's actions were without precedent. According to one historian of English poor relief, "the Central Authority set in motion the whole local machinery for the execution of the poor law." County officials resented the increased work load, and some of them even questioned whether they possessed constitutional authority to collect poor relief. The king's plan to pacify the poor, like his schemes to find additional revenue, were regarded by many Englishmen as another indication of growing absolutism, another assault on local independence.

The early years of Charles's reign brought disturbing efforts at religious innovation, both theological and institutional. Not only was the Arminianism of Laud offensive to England's Calvinists, but his ecclesiastical reforms aroused the antagonism of villagers and gentry alike in many parts of the realm. Laud was determined to force religious dissenters to conform to the Anglican service, and he urged his bishops to report any deviation from accepted ecclesiastical practice. Some bishops dragged their feet, but others were eager to please their superior. These men visited local congregations, broke up conventicles, and challenged respected ministers. Indeed, they attacked "popular protestantism" wherever they found it. In Hampshire angry villagers protested Laud's actions as "an unwonted, dangerous, and unwelcome innovation." People in other local communities agreed.

Laud's ecclesiastical officers also attempted to destroy "that ratsbane of lecturing" frequently found in the incorporated boroughs. Again, what men perceived as established local traditions were disturbed. According to one historian, when the king and his archbishop attacked the lectureships, "they were tampering not with a recent innovation but rather with an institution that in many places had been rooted in the life of the community for several generations." Laud's interference agitated people who wanted to preserve accustomed forms of worship and drove them into alliance with persons who resented the king's economic and political meddling.

Nothing created greater dislocation in the English countryside than Charles's military policies. Early in his reign the king decided to commit troops to the Continental wars. James had regarded overseas expeditions as an extravagance, but the wisdom of his position escaped Charles. He recklessly plunged ahead. Throughout the kingdom soldiers were pressed into service, marched to coastal cities, and dispatched to French battlefields from which few returned alive. The military companies consisted of the dregs of English society—misfits, troublemakers, men too poor to buy their way out of the army. The recruits often did not receive the "coat and conduct money" that might have sustained them on their journey to the port towns. The shortsightedness of this policy soon became apparent. Desperate bands of soldiers wandered from village to village disturbing the peace, assaulting people, and raping women.

Although many examples could be cited to show how Charles's unprecedented military innovations upset local institutions, the case of Great Yarmouth is sufficient to the purpose. When the deputy lieutenants of Norfolk called for twenty soldiers from Great Yarmouth, the bailiffs of that city responded with surprise that "it had not been used or known, time out of mind, that any land soldiers had been pressed in Yarmouth, it being a frontier town [that is, exposed to attack from the sea] and of special importance to the kingdom, and consisted principally of seafaring men." Soon after, one hundred Irish troops were sent into the town and, in the language of the day, "billeted there during His Majesty's pleasure." Unfortunately for this nonconformist center, the Irish turned out "to be all Papists," and the city watch had to be strengthened. Every household turned out with musket and pike, not to ward off foreign invaders, but to protect their lives and property from Charles's own troops. And Great Yarmouth got off easily in comparison with other places where there were serious riots. It would have been far better for the king not to have angered England's boroughs and local communities in this way. His policies only served to widen the growing gap between royal government and local authority. In the end he discovered that while he could frighten his subjects, he could not control them.

Resentment against the king's interference in local affairs was by no means restricted to the poor and the humble. His policies steadily undermined the loyalty of the great gentry families that dominated England's county communities. He expected them as deputy lieutenants to develop

what he termed a "perfect militia." He ordered them as justices of the peace to supervise poor relief. It was they who often ended up paying his illegal revenues, and when their spokesmen in Commons complained too strongly, Charles decided he could rule without Parliament's help.

The increased work load, the financial strain, even the constitutional crisis might have been borne had not Charles's policies threatened to alter traditional social relationships within the county communities themselves. The gentry discovered that by putting the king's directives into effect they alienated local support. Suddenly in the late 1620s some of them found themselves in a defensive position before the very people from whom they had always received deference. Local loyalties were important, far too important to lose over a foolish "perfect militia" or some other royal scheme. Charles warned the county leaders that "ther remissnes in executing thes our commands geves encouragement to the inferior sort of people," but despite such admonishments, men of better quality—"the High sheriff, deputy Lieutenants and Justices of peace, and under them the constables and other inferior officers"—concluded that it was better to have friends at home than to try to please the king.

The changes that took place in the incorporated boroughs are not entirely clear; historians have not given the problem adequate attention. It is known, however, that after 1621 the House of Commons tried to revive parliamentary elections in a number of boroughs that had long since stopped sending representatives, usually because of local poverty. The franchise in these towns was broadly defined, sometimes all householders being included, so that there was little likelihood that the crown could determine which men were sent to Parliament from these constituencies. But Charles was apparently unwilling to accept this state of affairs without a fight. After 1626 royal courts instituted *quo warranto* proceedings against the charters of several boroughs. Great Yarmouth reported that courtiers were plotting to "have the ancient and laudable custom of choosing two bailiffs altered." In 1629 its townsmen took up a subscription to defend their charter before King's Bench. A writ of *quo warranto*, issued against the corporation of Boston in 1627, charged local officials "with Having usurped" privileges and liberties "to the injury of the King's prerogatives." In 1631 the borough of Ipswich suddenly was forced "to make defense, and to procure confirmation of the Charter." In most of these cases the towns preserved their corporate rights after long and expensive court battles. The judicial outcome is less important than the fact that the king's attacks on the "ancient boroughs" seemed part of a general assault on England's local institutions. And it is probably not insignificant that a good many New Englanders originated in Boston, Ipswich, Great Yarmouth, and Norwich—all boroughs that had been forced to combat royal intervention.

In reaction to the king's continued interference in local affairs—his attacks on "popular protestantism," his disruption of the county communities, his assault on the corporate boroughs—a few thousand English men

and women chose to leave the country. To these people Charles must have seemed perfectly capable of establishing himself as an absolute ruler: the future of local society appeared dark to those who followed John Winthrop in 1630, and to the emigrants of the mid-1630s the situation must have looked nearly hopeless. Their response was essentially defensive, conservative, even reactionary.

There is a substantial body of information about how other people—not necessarily Puritans—reacted to the disruption of local communities and traditional ways of life by some outside authority. Invariably, the beleaguered groups assumed a defensive stance, resisting, sometimes with force, any alteration of accepted routine. Historian J. H. Elliott discovered that the population of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe deeply resented innovation. Indeed, the participants in violent risings seemed "obsessed by renovation—by the desire to return to old customs and privileges, and to an old order of society." England was no exception to the rule. In her comments on the Civil War, Joan Thirk observes that "the great majority of the gentry and peasantry, in their almost morbid anxiety to preserve the traditional fabric of local society, generally stood side by side." It appears that the same local communities that resisted Charles ultimately defeated Oliver Cromwell for he too tried to force them to change their ways—to make them integral parts of a centralized nation-state. These examples suggest that the English countryside was filled with traditionally oriented men and women, who, like turtles, pulled back into the safe and familiar shell of local custom at the first sign of danger.

The results of this conservative response would appear in the social institutions of New England. The colonists' experiences under Charles had heightened their sense of tradition, and whether they came from small country villages or sizable corporate boroughs, whether they were humble yeomen or influential county leaders, they shared a desire to preserve a customary way of life. That they were willing to travel three thousand miles to achieve that goal reveals how strongly some of them felt about the disruptions of local institutions. Like the Catholic proprietors who in the late 1630s tried to create a vast feudal major in Maryland, the Bay colonists looked to America as a place to escape the dislocating effects of social change.

These observations are not intended to imply that all colonists were of one mind about social institutions in the New World. They were not. The settlers' English background produced both unity and diversity. On the one hand, the people who transferred to New England during the 1630s were obviously influenced by the same general threats to local autonomy. This common experience helped to create broad areas of agreement about the character of New England society. On the other hand, the migration itself created diversity. New Englanders had crossed the Atlantic not as individual adventurers but as self-selected groups. Respected civil and religious leaders often recruited their neighbors, and it was not unusual for persons from the same small village to stay together once they reached Massachusetts. This type of migration, called "chain migration," meant that each group possessed



separate and distinct memories of life in the mother country. Stuart policies had affected them in different ways. Habits and traditions, attitudes toward land division, town government, church membership—all these things were in part the product of a specific environment. While Massachusetts society was still in its formative stages, therefore, each community was forced to work out the relationship between its own particular English heritage and a more general English background that it shared with other Bay communities. Seen in this light, New England was not a single, monolithic "fragment" separating off from the mother country. It was a body of loosely joined fragments, and some of the disputes that developed in the New World grew out of differences that had existed in the Old.

### III

The early migrants to Massachusetts Bay were anxious to recapture a traditional way of life. Left behind were interfering Stuart officials and troublesome Anglican bishops. The very openness of New England made it possible for the colonists to transform social ideas into actual institutions. Each group of immigrants had an opportunity to create an independent community, a village in which local institutions might be safe from outside interference. The settlers' commitment to the preservation of local autonomy led almost inevitably to social diversity, and within a decade after Winthrop's arrival, a score of towns had taken root in Massachusetts, each developing institutions slightly different from those of its neighbors.

But the preservation of local institutions involved New Englanders in difficulties that no one anticipated. The immigrants were obsessed with local autonomy that almost without being conscious of it, they created institutions that looked very little like those they had left behind in the mother country. The settlers realized that within a locally broad participation in civil, military, and ecclesiastical affairs would help to secure local independence from central authority, and voluntarism quickly became the hallmark of Massachusetts society. The colonists had no use for democracy, but they believed that anyone who possessed a voice in local concerns thereby acquired a responsibility to the community as a whole. Indeed, the person who enjoyed such a privilege would find it in his best interests to defend those elements that had been threatened in England—continuity, independence, and insularity.

The irony was that the New Englanders' social goals forced them unwittingly to accept significant social change. In elections of all sorts they opened the franchise to men who would have been excluded in almost every English borough and town. In the early years of settlement the need for such alterations seemed perfectly obvious. Winthrop and the first assistants of the Massachusetts Bay Company could legally have become a narrow oligarchy selecting themselves anew year after year. But Winthrop encouraged a considerable expansion in the number of voters, a group that could and later did

drop him from the governorship. The people who enlarged the franchise do not seem to have been as much concerned with creating an ideal Puritan commonwealth as with averting absolutism. To appreciate how the settlers' English backgrounds influenced social institutions, one has only to examine the towns, churches, and trainbands established in Massachusetts Bay during the 1630s. In each case, parallel forms developed which strongly suggest that socio-cultural experiences in the mother country after 1625 were a major determinant in the way the colonists organized New England society.

Colonial historians have only recently come to appreciate the diversity of New England towns. Some evidence suggests that Winthrop wanted the settlers of 1630 to form one large fortified community, but whatever his ideas may have been, the colonists quickly went their separate ways. Historians who have traced the development of the early towns have been struck by local differences. Intensive studies of Andover, Dedham, Hingham, and Sudbury reveal how misleading it is to speak of the New England town. Some of the communities experienced bitter feuds; others were quite stable. Some were more commercially oriented than others. There was no uniform method of dividing lands, running town meetings, or laying out house lots. Edward Johnson surveyed the villages of Massachusetts Bay and discovered that while people in some places clustered around the meetinghouse, those in other communities were relatively dispersed. In Concord, for example, he found that the "buildings [were] conveniently placed chiefly in one strait stream [street]. . . ." But in Newbury the "houses are built very scattering, which hath caused some contending about removal of their place for Sabbath Assemblies." And when Johnson visited Salisbury he observed that "the people of this Towne have of late placed their dwellings so much distanced the one from the other, that they are like to divide into two Churches." In other words, even in the earliest years of settlement some towns allowed "out-livers" to erect homes away from the center of the village.

What the towns of Massachusetts Bay had in common was a desire to preserve their individual autonomy. New England villagers often bound themselves together by written covenants, promising to uphold certain clearly stated principles. Historians have analyzed these covenants, but few have seen them as an indication of the colony's reactionary origins. These voluntary agreements provided villagers with a sense of local identity, a rationale for excluding outsiders, and a means of achieving continuity between present and future generations. Moreover, the covenants served a more immediate function. By promoting harmony and homogeneity, they helped to ward off the kind of external interference that had been so troublesome in the mother country. Many town covenants contained a section specifically committing townsmen to settle their disputes through love and friendly arbitration. While this provision seems an expression of Christian charity, it also reduced the likelihood that colonial magistrates would intervene in local affairs. And by screening potential inhabitants—indeed, by accepting in some cases only those people who had emigrated from a particular English district—many towns

avoided the contention that conflicting backgrounds and traditions might have bred. Each individual was under strong peer-group pressure to give his first loyalty to the town, and, as one might expect, New England's local communities resisted anything that threatened established routine.

The Congregational churches were another institution that revealed the effect of the English background on the character of Massachusetts society. Historians have exaggerated the intolerance of the colony's ministers and magistrates. Although, to be sure, such outspoken critics of the New England Way as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were exiled, Congregational orthodoxy, compared to other seventeenth-century religious systems, allowed a relatively wide range of opinion on questions of polity and theology.

Because the settlers insisted on local control over religious affairs, it is not surprising that significant differences developed among the churches. In fact, the Congregational system itself fostered diversity. New Englanders who had resented Laud's interference refused in America to recognize any ecclesiastical authority beyond the local community. Colony-wide synods could recommend—even cajole—but they could not order individual congregations to alter religious procedures. In the words of the Cambridge Platform of 1648, the churches were "distinct, and therefore may not be confounded one with another: and equal, and therefore have not dominion one over another." Only in the most extreme cases did the political leaders of Massachusetts involve themselves in local church matters, and then only reluctantly. Normally, the church-members of a village selected their minister, set his salary, and determined ecclesiastical policy. One colonist, Thomas Lechford, described in 1642 some of the ways in which the churches varied. The Boston congregation, for example, was ruled "by unanimous consent," while in Salem decisions required only "the major part of the church." Moreover, Lechford found that "some Churches have no ruling Elders, some but one, some but one teaching Elder, some have two ruling, and two teaching Elders; some one, some two or three Deacons. . . ." It was not only in details of polity that congregations exercised their discretion. Even in the earliest years of colonization, some towns such as Newbury favored presbyterian forms of worship.

Some contemporaries in the mother country regarded the Bay colonists as religious innovators, experimenting with extreme types of separatism. These English critics were correct on one count. In the early 1630s there were few precedents for the ecclesiastical system that developed in Massachusetts. In 1644 one colonial minister, William Hooke, admitted, "It is a truth, we saw but little in comparison of what we now do, when we left our Native homes." But what the people back in England failed to understand was that the colonists regarded Congregationalism as a means to restore the Protestant faith and preserve true religion from outside interference. Because they were safely beyond Laud's reach, they enjoyed an opportunity to do in the 1630s what was denied Englishmen until the 1640s. The New Englanders gave the church back to the local communities. And in so doing they were responding not

only to the freedom of their new environment but also to specific conditions that they had experienced in England. New England's Congregational churches, like its towns, were the result of the general antipathy that the colonists felt toward Stuart centralism.

The colonists also created a system of defense. Military organizations by their very nature would seem to demand a highly centralized chain of command. If the New Englanders had been willing to compromise their desire for local autonomy, one might expect them to have done so in the formation of their militia. But the shape of this social institution was not so very different from that of the Congregational churches and the town governments. All of them stressed local control, even if that meant an unprecedented degree of popular participation in the selection of leaders.

In England it had been Charles's appointed officers, usually his deputy lieutenants, who had most frequently disrupted country life. They had been responsible for the king's "perfect militia," for the collection of parliamentary levies, and for the billeting of unwelcome troops. With such experiences in mind the settlers of Massachusetts Bay insisted upon placing as many local controls on the military as security would allow. The colonial government could dispatch an army against the Indians, but the militia itself was a village institution. Not only did the townsmen drill together, they also chose their own officers. As early as 1632 Winthrop reported that "a proposition was made by the people, that every company of trained men might choose their own captain and officers." By the mid-1630s local trainband elections had become common practice throughout the colony. Although the Massachusetts General Court claimed ultimate authority in the selection of officers, the legislators seldom rejected a name, and local nomination amounted to final selection.

Some military men thought that the New Englanders had lost their good sense. One veteran of European campaigns complained that the Massachusetts system would destroy discipline. Voluntarism had no place in matters of defense, and the colony's organization appeared to this person, at least, a wrong-headed innovation. But the colonists were not concerned with winning Continental wars; they were far more conscious of the meddling deputy lieutenants who had made life so unpleasant in England. It was the king's appointed officers, not the elected New Englanders, who were viewed as the true innovators. The immigrants merely restored the trainbands to community control. Once the militia had been transformed into a local structure, it became highly unlikely that it could be used to oppress the settlers. And it is not surprising that a survey of Massachusetts records reveals no instance in which the colony's rulers attempted to employ the militia as a police force, as a tax collector, or as an instrument of social control.

The colonists' English background affected life in Massachusetts in another way that no one expected. Instead of promoting unity, it became a source of dissension, especially in political and ecclesiastical matters, and within a few years the settlers were forced to confront the unpleasant realiza-

tion that they were not all interested in preserving the same things in the New World. Like their contemporaries in the mother country, a majority of the New Englanders seem to have been concerned primarily with what occurred in their own villages. They built homes, sowed crops, made love, and for the most part gave scant attention to the actions of the colony's central government. As one colonist explained, "Plantations in their beginning have worke enough, and find difficulties sufficient to settle a comfortable way of subsistence, their beinge buildings, fencings, cleering and breaking up of ground, lands to be attended, orchards to be planted, highways and bridges and fortifications to be made." But other men such as Winthrop appear to have regarded Massachusetts Bay as a sort of American "county community." These people naturally defined "local" in larger terms than did the other colonists, and when they were forced to curb the independence of certain local institutions, they found themselves suddenly cast in the role of Charles I. Ironically, tensions between central authority and local custom had followed the settlers to the New World.

The division was most apparent in political affairs. Indeed, at the same time that the colony's local institutions were taking shape, the central government was a continuous source of conflict. A year seldom passed without Bay rulers accusing each other of some abuse of power, and on one occasion at least jealousy and anger sparked an attempt to impeach Winthrop. These political battles have been closely examined, and much is known about their intellectual content. So far, however, no historian has adequately explained the social origins of these disputes. Since all the colonists involved presumably had similar religious views, one is forced to look elsewhere for the roots of dissensions. Why, indeed, did an elected governor and a court of assistants find it so difficult to work in harmony with an elected house of deputies representing the towns of Massachusetts Bay? Had the local communities carried their contempt for external authority to such an extreme that they were unwilling to tolerate the slightest outside interference in their affairs?

In most of these controversies Winthrop and a small group of like-minded magistrates were pitted against an outspoken but loosely connected body of village representatives. The reasons for these fights were complex, but one of them no doubt was the way in which the governor and his allies defined "local" interests. Although Winthrop had not been a leader of the first rank in his native English county, Suffolk, he counted among his friends some of the most powerful gentry families in the shire. His business dealings carried him regularly from his home at Groton Manor to London, and he knew firsthand how a county community operated. The most influential members of the gentry (in Suffolk they would have been the Barnardistons and Barringtons) acted as mediators between England's central government and the specific interests of their county. When they spoke of preserving independence or complained of royal interference, they usually had the shire in mind.

The actions of Winthrop and a few other men of similar experience suggest that they arrived in America intent on reproducing a county com-

munity. In this smaller New World pond they may well have regarded themselves as bigger fish and assumed the role and responsibilities of the leading gentry of Massachusetts Bay. Although they were elected to office annually by the colony's freemen, they saw themselves as natural rulers—as persons prepared by God, training, and status to act in the colonists' best interests. The New England county elite received advice from the people with ill grace, viewing any attempt to limit their discretionary powers as a personal insult. The Winthrops of Massachusetts believed that the voters should trust the gentry's judgment in much the same manner as in the mother country. These notions about the government and society grew out of a special English background, and to Winthrop's chagrin they were challenged by groups within the colony who conceived of "local" autonomy in rather different terms.

Most settlers were willing to trust this self-styled county elite, but only up to a point. They had gone through too much in England, traveled too far, raised their expectations about local autonomy too high to do simply as Winthrop and his friends desired. In any case, the colonists found it difficult to regard these leaders as mere county gentry. The nature of this authority seemed quite different from that of the Barringtons and Barnardistons. They issued important executive orders, served in the highest courts, and claimed broad powers and privileges on the basis of a royal charter granted to the Massachusetts Bay Company. No one, of course, confused John Winthrop with Charles Stuart, but it seemed clear that the governor spoke for the central government as opposed to the local communities. Almost as soon as the migrants arrived in the New World they sought ways to control the magistrates' discretionary powers and to ensure that civil rulers in Massachusetts understood that the ultimate source of political authority was a collection of independent corporate towns speaking through their elected delegates.

One of the better illustrations of the division between New England's county elite and the local communities occurred in 1632, when the Massachusetts Court of Assistants, a small group of magistrates selected at large by the colony's freemen, levied a tax to finance a fortification at Newtown (later renamed Cambridge). This act met with immediate resistance in neighboring Watertown, where the town's minister and its leading elder summoned the villagers together and admonished them that "it was not safe to pay moneys after that sort, for fear of bringing themselves and posterity into bondage." The people of Watertown concluded that they had been taxed without adequate representation.

Winthrop rejected this argument out of hand. The assistants, he explained, were like members of Parliament in that they represented the interests of the voters who had chosen them. But Winthrop missed the point of the Watertown protest. When it came to matters of taxation, these villagers wanted someone in the legislature who represented the interests not of the entire colony but of their own locality. People living in other communities apparently shared this view, for despite assurances from Winthrop that



a colony-wide elite would govern fairly, the Massachusetts freemen insisted in 1634 on having local representatives participate in the legislative process. In a historic decision the General Court ordered that each town select two or three men who "shalbe hereafter soe deputed by the freemen of [the] severall plantacions, to deale in their behalfe, in the publique affayres of the commonwealth." A good many New Englanders in the 1630s obviously would have asked with William Pynchon of Springfield, "If magistrates in N. E. should ex officio practice such a power over mens proprieties, how long would Tyrany be kept out of our habitations?"

The clash between local and county views of government authority reached a dramatic climax in 1645. In the spring of that year the militiamen of Hingham selected a West Country migrant, Anthony Eames, as their captain. For reasons that remain unclear, however, Eames fell out of favor with his neighbors, and the trainband held a second election, this time choosing Bozone Allen. At this point Winthrop, then the colony's deputy governor, stepped in and accused Allen's supporters of fomenting insubordination to lawful authority. Allen's followers countered in no uncertain terms that by intervening in a local affair Winthrop had exceeded his legitimate powers, and the disgruntled Hinghamites organized an unsuccessful attempt within the Massachusetts General Court to impeach him. Throughout the controversy the inhabitants of Hingham insisted that they were defending local autonomy against unwarranted outside interference. Hingham reacted to what it perceived as a threat to its independence much as the English local communities reacted first to Charles and then to Cromwell. And like the members of Parliament, the village representatives serving in the Massachusetts legislature tried to assert their rights through impeachment. Winthrop came out of this trial with his reputation intact, but Hingham had served notice that civil power flowed up from the local communities, not down from a county elite.

By the 1650s the Bay colonists had sorted out their various English backgrounds. Unexpected problems had been confronted, and compromises made. But for most of them the trip to the New World had been an overwhelming success. The Massachusetts countryside at mid-century appeared remarkably like the traditional English society which they had sought to preserve from Stuart intervention. One historian has termed New England's little settlements "peasant utopias"—a description that captures their backward-looking character. Most of them went years without significant change in institutional forms or procedures. The townsmen regarded the village as the center of their lives; indeed, most were married and buried in the places of their birth. The vast undeveloped lands to the west had little appeal. Sel-don has a conservative movement so fully achieved its aims.

